

# Live From CroisiEurope's Douce France: An American Cruising With the French

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The French travel company, CroisiEurope, may just be the largest river cruise line that you've never heard of. Founded by the now-deceased Gerard Schmitter in 1976, the Strasbourg-based company has river cruise ships around the world and offers some of the most creative itineraries in the business.

We're on [Douce France](#), a 1997 ship that underwent a total stern-to-bow renovation earlier this year, drastically reducing the number of passengers from 160 to 107. Inaugurated in May 2017, the ship is now considered one of Croisi's premium "5 anchor" vessels and has an extremely modern look and feel.

CroisiEurope attracts an international audience that can vary widely depending on the itinerary; on this short sailing on Germany's Moselle and Rhine rivers, we're one of eight Americans, with the remaining 56 passengers hailing from France. (Next week, we'll be trying one of Croisi's other signature offerings: a barge cruise in the Loire River valley).

Here are some of our impressions on what it's like being an English-speaking passenger on a French line, as well as some thoughts about Douce France.

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### **Birds of a Feather.**

On the first day we boarded, the hotel director gathered the English speakers together in the main lounge for our muster and a briefing. We've been given a table of eight for all of our meals, and an English-speaking activity director to answer questions and guide us through the daily programs. Our fellow Americans hail from Texas and Washington; all chose CroisiEurope for the convenience of the shorter itinerary, wrapping the sailing into a longer European trip. All seem to appreciate the down time that river cruising gives you, after the hectic pace of a land trip.

### **Outgoing Staff.**

When you're the minority language onboard, you rely on staff to help you out. We're finding the Douce France crew up to the task. Sylvie, the hotel manager who hails from Portugal, speaks excellent English and is always happy to help us out. Our designated activity director is always on hand as well. Because Croisi is so international in scope, preparing for different languages is part of the ship's DNA, Sylvie told us; passengers on Douce France this past summer ranged from Norwegians to Spaniards to Germans. Onboard activities tend toward those that can traverse cultural boundaries, such as a world monument picture trivia game, or light exercises to international hits such as Despacito.

## Left Out.

That's not to say that there haven't been a few hiccups with the language. We were the only Americans on the bus transfer from Strasbourg to Cochem (the other English speakers elected to meet the boat at the dock), and we had fish-out-of-water syndrome when no announcements were repeated in English (luckily, we found some international journalists who are also on this cruise to serve as translators). Likewise, our tour of Reichsburg Castle had a French guide and we were given sheets of paper to follow along. While we still received the basic information this way, we know we missed many of the jokes and definitely felt left out. The musical entertainment in the evening too, is more French than international, although a rousing version of YMCA bonded everyone together.

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## New Ship Smell.

When Croisi renovates a ship, they don't kid around. Almost everything in the original Douce France has been scrapped, with completely updated decor. The cabins and hallways are stark white, the main lounge has purple neon lights and sparkly stars above the dance floor, and the color palette overall is soft lavender with bright pops of chartreuse. Although the average age of the passengers is still on the upper end -- 60s through early 70s -- the ship's look is definitely modern. One lingering question we do have: Why renovate a ship and neglect to put in enough electrical outlets or USB ports? We're unplugging lamps to charge our devices.



## **Aquarium Class.**

We've sailed on countless river cruise vessels, but this is the first time that we've been in an "aquarium class" cabin, the nickname given to lower deck berths that sit on the water line. On Douce France, though, this isn't a hardship. Instead of three decks of cabins that you find on most river ships, Douce France only has two. This means that more of the first deck cabin is above the water and we have two large picture windows in our room (including a section that opens for fresh air) as opposed to the tiny window at the top of the room that you get on most vessels. These windows bring in a lot of light, and make the room seem more spacious than its square footage (the bathroom, though, feels very small). Beds face the window, not the wall, which also makes the cabins more pleasant. Add in the plentiful storage and comfy beds, and we're pretty content with our accommodations.



## **Value, Yes.**

The international travel journalists onboard have touted the value that Croisi gives Europeans, and we agree that a lot is included for the price. All fares bundle alcoholic drinks, Wi-Fi, gratuities, transfers and daily excursions (there are two packages for the latter, Classic and Discovery, which are more offbeat; you pay a different fare upfront to receive these). Indeed, the wine flows freely and it's all French (which is a little odd when you're traveling through some of Germany's top wine regions).

## **Meal Choice, No.**

One factor that makes Croisi a hard sell to Americans is the lack of choice at meals. There's one set menu for both lunch and dinner -- with mostly French items such as duck terrine and pot au feu -- and that's it. For Americans used to "always available" menu items and a wide variety of food onboard, the "eat what we tell you" approach is disconcerting. That being said, the hotel manager encouraged passengers with special diets to give advance notice, and have told us that they can accommodate most requests. And we're pleasantly surprised by our American counterparts onboard, who seem very content with the offerings. Perhaps we're not as demanding as the rest of the world thinks? Still, if you're a picky eater, this is not the line for you.

*--By Chris Gray Faust, Senior Editor*